

# Suffering and Serving in the Shadows

April 25, 2024

No one wants to feel their lives are insignificant. We like to know that we're making a positive difference, at least somewhere. While those who have the gifts of speaking and teaching can easily see how their work is furthering the kingdom, what if the people who suffer alone, who have ministries with a limited reach, or who encourage others behind the scenes are having the most profound influence on the universe? What if the people who suffer and serve in the shadows are making the greatest eternal impact?

## We Are Never Alone

When we suffer in obscurity, we forget that humans are not the only beings who see us. As I wrote in a recent [article on desiring God](#), we are all on a giant battleground, where angels and demons are craning their necks to see what they can learn about God through us. They are watching to see how God helps us, how his presence dispels our fears, and how he inspires our worship. While it may seem like we're suffering alone in a dark room, we're actually on an enormous stage with innumerable eyewitnesses. We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses who are watching us intently.

Since we are never alone, our influence may reach farther than we can imagine. I'm sure there are many pastors who have diligently labored in small churches, discouraged their pews are so empty, wondering how many lives I have touched. They prepare and sacrifice just as much as others, but their fruit isn't as visible to the world. Missionaries may feel the same way — people who have given their lives for the gospel, uprooting their families and everything they knew, to share the good news with people in other countries. But the work is often slow, with no visible progress or converts or praise. Most of my family was converted in India, and many ancestors came to Christ through the work of missionaries who labored for years with few converts.

## Barnabas' Example: Encouraging and Believing

Being faithful in obscurity. Working for God and His kingdom without regard to our own. Encouraging others in their gifts without jealousy. Cheering for others from behind the scenes. None of those things are glamorous, yet their impact on the kingdom is eternal. That's what Barnabas did, and he had an unparalleled influence on the human authors of the New Testament. While Barnabas had gifts of speaking and teaching, his most lasting gift was seeking people out and believing two men who wrote much of the New Testament. His most memorable work didn't bring him glory but was for the glory of God.

We first hear of Barnabas when he generously sold some property and laid it at the disciples' feet. His name was Joseph, but the disciples nicknamed him Barnabas which means son of encouragement (Acts 4:36-37), so we know that from the beginning, Barnabas was gifted with encouraging people. After Paul was converted, the disciples were afraid of Paul, doubtful that he was truly a fellow disciple of Christ. Paul had once been a bitter enemy of the church, murdering Christians and ruthlessly pursuing them, so it's understandable why the disciples didn't immediately welcome him.

But Barnabas was different. He believed Paul and took him to the disciples, personally sharing Paul's conversion story and the evidence he'd seen of Paul's change of heart. His commendation convinced others to let Paul be a part of their ministry and community. After Paul's conversion, Paul's powerful

testimony and ministry threatened the Jews who then tried to kill him. So the disciples sent him off to Tarsus for his protection.

### **Barnabas' Example: Seeking the Forgotten**

We don't know how long Paul was in Tarsus, possibly for years, but we do know that Barnabas went to look for him when it was safe to return to ministry. When Barnabas found him, he brought Paul to Antioch, where they stayed and taught for a year. It was here that Christ-followers were first called Christians. These two men had a large public ministry together and began missionary journeys, from which Paul wrote his many letters to the churches.

I love the fact that Barnabas sought out Paul. He didn't forget him, even years after they'd last been together. The disciples didn't seem too concerned about Paul — perhaps to them, he was out of sight and out of mind. That happens to many of us. When we are no longer in church for various reasons like health, people quickly forget about us. At first they call, and then it feels like we were never there. But Barnabas didn't forget.

### **Barnabas' Example: Offering Second Chances**

Barnabas was also an encourager to John Mark, who set out with Barnabas and Paul on their first missionary journey. But soon afterwards John Mark abruptly left and went back to Jerusalem, after which Paul didn't trust him. Paul refused to take John Mark on the next journey and had such a sharp disagreement with Barnabas over the matter that Paul and Barnabas separated. Paul took Silas, and Barnabas took John Mark. Barnabas believed in John Mark, even at personal cost to himself.

This is the last mention of Barnabas in Acts, so we don't know details of his ministry with John Mark, and Paul only briefly mentions Barnabas in his letters. But we do know that John Mark, the man Barnabas believed in and sacrificed for, wrote the first recorded gospel. We know it as the Gospel according to Mark, the first written record of Christ. The gospel upon which most of the other accounts are based.

Mark likely derived his gospel narrative from Peter, an eyewitness to Christ's life and ministry. Mark persevered in furthering the early church and apparently became indispensable to Paul's own ministry towards his life's end (2 Timothy 4:11).

### **The Impact of Suffering and Serving in the Shadows**

Barnabas' support was crucial in keeping Mark in ministry, influencing not only his contemporaries but also countless generations who have read his gospel. Barnabas is not the author of any New Testament books, but his influence on Scripture is tremendous. Through his gifts of encouragement, intentionally seeking out and believing in others, he proved pivotal in the lives and ministries of both Paul and Mark. Though Barnabas wasn't heralded much on earth and couldn't have known the magnitude of his influence, his impact on our faith is monumental.

Do you ever wonder if what you're doing has made any difference? Do you measure your influence by what is visible, or can you trust that God is multiplying your ministry in ways you may never know in this life? If you feel as if you are suffering and serving in the shadows, take heart knowing that everything you do and say is being watched by the unseen world, a world of angels and demons, of powers and principalities, of a great cloud of witnesses and our triune God himself. One day perhaps you'll see all God has accomplished and inspired through your humble faithfulness.